

the formation of a special committee to investigate Buddhist complaints. The statement was inadequate and accomplished nothing.

Many of the people in the American mission felt that Diem might have been more forthcoming if it had not been for the influence of Nhu, who was behaving more and more strangely. John Mecklin, head of the United States Information Service in Saigon, reports that at a dinner party in front of high-ranking Vietnamese and Americans, including Ambassador Nolting himself, Nhu attacked his own brother, saying that "Diem was inept and 'weak,' an incompetent leader because he tried to compromise with the Buddhists. He, Nhu, was ready to quit the government if Diem failed to be tough, and indeed he had already submitted his resignation if Diem wanted to accept it."<sup>4</sup> And he rambled on in this vein for five hours. Saigon was full of rumors that Nhu was planning a coup against his own brother, and one newspaperman was so bold as to confront Nhu with the story. Nhu denied that he intended a coup, but he went on to say that if the Buddhist question were not solved, it would indeed lead to a coup, a coup which would be anti-American, anti-Buddhist, and anti-weak government.<sup>5</sup> Secretary Thuan, for whom we all had great respect, later told American friends that Nhu was taking "opium" at this time and this helped push him toward his states of extremism. "You could begin to see the madness in his face," Thuan said, "a sort of somnambulistic stare, always with that cold smile." And there were repeated intelligence reports that Nhu had some notion, reminiscent of his offer to de Gaulle to settle the Algerian war, that he could negotiate an end to the war and that he had been attempting to set up a secret channel of communications with Hanoi.

#### NOLTING'S LAST DAYS

Shortly thereafter, Nolting, in what he thought was a casual aside to an interviewer, remarked that there had been no persecution of the Buddhists in Vietnam and that the Buddhist crisis was a side issue distracting time and energy from the important thing, which was to win the war. The statement that there had been no persecution of the Buddhists was, of course, basically true, but following the weeks of lurid pictures of priests being beaten a public statement to that effect was inept. And to call the Buddhist crisis a side issue was provocative. The Buddhists seized on Nolting's remark, charging that Nolting had never been inside a pagoda and knew nothing of Buddhism, and that his remark must be only a "last gift to Ngo Dinh Diem." And the Nhuses also seized on it, hailing Nolting in the *Times of Vietnam* and playing the story to bring out the implication that the United States was siding with the government and against the Buddhists.

Everything that happened to Nolting those last few weeks went sour.